

Sikh Empire {1799-1846}

Sikhism took birth in Punjab in 1520 A.D; and despite having Muslim Sufi saints teachings as part of their religion they were treated at times harshly by the Mughals notably by the Aurangzeb not purely on religious grounds but it also had the spice of royal politics as well. In 1762 Ahmad Shah Abdalli's forces on their way back after plundering Delhi were attacked by the Sikh Misls which were concentrated east of River Jhelum. 1799 marks the end of Afghan Empire when Sikh's under Ranjit Singh entered into Lahore and slowly but gradually the Afghan Empire started shrinking. Sikhs entry towards the west of Indus started with the capitulation of Mankera and its nawab in 1822, very next year Ranjit Singh marched across Indus and marched through Isa Khel and Marwat territory, in 1836 Bannu was made part of the Sikh empire after the defeat of Nawab of Dera.

Sikh signifies a disciple or learner from Hindustani word *sikhna* 'to learn'. They profess to learn everything from their guru who composed the *gurunth*. Sing or Singh is a lion and is a title which is assumed by almost every Sikh whether he be a *sepahi* or not.¹ Cow is venerated by Sikhs even more than that of Hindus 'Former were besieging a fort on Indus and heard that Patahan garrison had killed a cow; when they took it, they put everyone to death, in another *acsea* Mussalman was found eating roast beef in Peshawar, Sikhs kindled a large fire, placed their victim within the circle they formed around, prevented his escape by thrusting pointed sticks at him and so burnt him alive'.²

In 1834 Sikhs overpowered Afghans at Nowshehra and Peshawar along with Kohat came under their control. It was at Jamrud in 1837 that this tide was checked and with the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839 the Sikh Empire similar to so many other empires stared at the writing on the wall. Sikhs did not had an easy and comprehensive control over the territory and people living on the Western bank of River Indus yet through a blend of diplomacy and militancy Ranjit was able to have his forces in Peshawar³ and for a short time had the control over the Khyber Pass as well. The Kabul and Lahore thus remain embroiled in a constant war of attrition. Kabul.

Sikh empire had a short life but it had a deep impact on the coming events, it was an independent kingdom not subject to King of Delhi or the East India Company, Sikh at their own under some of the most brilliant generals including Hari Singh Nalwa took the Afghans head on and pushed them back. Ranjit Singh was an able ruler and a shrewd one too, he had European officers as part of his army, he introduced the existing standards of drill and organization in *khalsa* army. One beauty of his army was its ethnic and religious composition, Muslims, Hindus and Christians all served together. The very first governor of Peshawar was a French who was serving under Ranjit. Fakirs, Aziz ud Din and Nur Ud din, originally barbers but these two brothers served as chief secretary and confidant of Maharajah. To the French and Italian officers in his service Ranjit Singh is mainly indebted for the formation of his disciplined troops, remarked G.T.Vigne in 1838. They included Capatins Ford, Foulkes, Steinbach, De La Font, De la Roche and Van Cortlandt

¹ G.T.Vigne *A personal narrative of a visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, & Afghanistan, first published 1840, reprinted Sang e Meel, Lahore, 1982, p- 245.*

² G.T.Vigne *A personal narrative of a visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, & Afghanistan, first published 1840, reprinted Sang e Meel, Lahore, 1982, p-246.*

³Khullar, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*. {Hem, New Delhi,1980}. pp-48-52, pp 121-129

Sikhism took birth in Punjab in 1520 AD and despite having Muslim sufi saints teachings as part of their religion they were prosecuted ruthlessly by the Aurangzeb and as such when the Abdalli's forces were marching back to the mountain retreat they were attacked by the Sikh bands. In 1799 the Sikhs finally captured Lahore and within years had the Kashmir, Multan and Peshawar under their control, for the first time in a thousand years the martial supremacy of the mountain dwellers of Hindu Kush was broken by the native dwellers of plains of India.

In 1800 with Mughal emperor practically confined to Delhi, and rest of Punjab in a state of anarchy after the Abdalli's ravage of Delhi under the afghan governors at Lahore and Multan, a young Sikh, Ranjeet Singh captured Lahore and became maharaja and the very first Sikh empire was founded that became a challenge to the Muslims, this Sikh empire that lasted till 1846, six more years then Maharajah Ranjit Singh incorporated, captured, annexed, subjugated, ruled from Kabul {for a short period} in west, Gilgit, Laddakh, Srinagar, Jammu in north, Multan in south and under 1807 treaty with British East Company {the Christians who having arrived in subcontinent in 15th century from Portugal, Spain, England, Netherland and France as traders finally culminated in the superiority of the British soldiery, firepower and discipline, who by this year were the kingmakers} that limits Singh's eastern boundary and influence till Sutlej. It was in 1820 that Ranjit Singh was able to conquer the vale of Kashmir and later instead of keeping it under his direct control at Lahore; he rather made Ghulab Singh a Sikh Dogra chieftain of Jammu state. Statesman ship, diplomacy and bravery were the hallmarks of Ranjit Singh's rule and personality, he was handicapped with one eye, a fundamentalist Sikh yet as a ruler he set the very first example and conduct of a Sikh state and how the Hindus and Muslims will be treated in it and this later became a pattern in other Sikh states. Ranjit Singh had Muslim advisers most notable among them the Fakir brothers, Ranjit was careful with money and instead of bearing the cost of garrisoning he preferred annual tax, he did this with Bahawalpur a desert state and mountainous Kashmir. Ranjit had a diminutive size

Ranjit Singh in a sense reflects the culture and mind set of a Punjabi who prefers his plain, green fields more than the mountains or desert, Punjabi lived on the land, irrigating it with ever flowing ever present fresh water of Kashmir. Ranjit father was a zamindar Ranjit Singh did a lot to improve the irrigation system and so were the British who in 1846 were able to annex Punjab after a series of battles that took place at Chillianwala and Sobraon. Later both races, cultures and religions developed a deep trust and mutual respect for each others bravery and martial skills, at this decisive moment of sub continental history neither any Muslim nor any Hindu state came to the rescue of Punjab empire further more even raja Ghulab Singh remained aloof from this war, he was able to negotiate later the purchase of Kashmir Vale from British East India Company for 85 lakh rupees {present day US\$1, 000, 00}.

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⁴ Khullar, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*. {Hem, New Delhi, 1980}. pp-48-52, pp 121-129

in these three directions and were able to capture the Gilgit, Skardu, Laddakh and also made inroads into tribal territory of Marghalla and Hazara hills. Ranjit Singh also staked claims on Eastern Afghanistan⁵.

Kunwar Kurrak Singh succeeded his father Ranjit Singh, Kurrak's son Naunihal Singh was a great favourite of Ranjit. Adopted sons of Ranjit Singh were named after the conquered areas like Multan Singh, Kashmir Singh. Sher Singh was the eldest he was favourite with army, he was allowed to sit on a chair by the side of maharajah ranjoit Singh. Ranjit's other favourite was Raja Hera Singh who was son of minister rajah Dhihan Singh, Naunihal was allowed to sit by the ranjit's side

The most powerful of the sirdars were the three brothers, Rajah Gulab Singh of Jammu, Rajah Dhihan Singh of Bhimber who was the prime minister of Maharajah; and Rajah Sucheyt Singh of Ramnagar. Sucheyt was effeminately handsome and always dressed splendidly. These were not rajputs but were Dogras { do rug which means mixed blood }

Ghulab Singh was as brave as Ranjit Singh, he had no other option but to expand and explore towards north, east and west as in south the British had the plains of Punjab. Ghulab Singh's forces majority of them Sikhs but also Muslims as well, captured Laddakh{1835}, Gilgit, and ventured into Tibet as well. These were the areas, cultures and civilisations about which very little was known in the west. The European continental rivalry had its effects on the India as well, first it was the threat of Napoleon in 1807 which compelled British East India Company to send diplomats and explorers into Baluchistan and make treaties with Sikhs,⁶ it also resulted in the First Anglo Afghan war as well later the fear of Czars replaced Napoleon and with this shift in paradigm the Kashmir especially its north western borders assume greater urgency and a great game started Kashmir also became the focal point of India's trade with central Asia albeit as an alternative to the much easy and economical route that passes through Khyber or Bolan passes. Kashmir which was ruled by Dillip Singh after Gulab Singh and his heirs later buckle under Raj's pressure and British explorers were allowed map the territorial boundaries of the Raj's empire, to station the British resident and in 1895 to have a residency with British officer and Dogra troops at Gilgit. Kashmir and few other states like Hyderabad Deccan, Kalat among over 550 other states that ranged from few kilometres in area to size equal or more than the British isles had varying degree of autonomy depending on the financial and cultural mind set of Viceroy who was all powerful and all princely rulers owe their rule to the Crown.

⁵ Miller, *Khyber*, p xv

⁶ Army Publishing House, *Campaigns of The Second Afghan War 1878-80*, pp25-37